

Quill and Ink Fulfill a Commandment at Temple Emanu-El



Photos courtesy of Temple Emanu-El

Robin and Ed Stairman with Rabbi Levi Selwyn

By [Deahn Berrini Leblang](#)

[Jewish Journal Staff](#)

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MARBLEHEAD — Quill pens in hand, black ink dripping, Robin and Ed Stairman, members of Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead, sat with retired Minister Fred Alling, formerly of St. Michael’s Church in Marblehead. Ed Stairman marked the letter bet on his paper and shook his head. “I’m afraid my hand might be too shaky,” commented Alling, echoing Stairman’s uncertainty.

The three were participating in Temple Emanu-El’s Torah Writing Project, a celebration of the Temple’s sixtieth anniversary. The temple’s new unfinished Torah, donated by an anonymous member, came with letters outlined, but not filled in, at the beginning and end of each of the five books. On four dates — March 8 and 24, May 10 and June 10 — members of the congregation and invited members of the community will fill in the outlined letters and complete the Torah.

Although the letter scribing process is primarily for members, Rabbi David Meyer said that the impulse is to share this “unique, sacred and joyous” event with the larger community as well.

Thus, every class at Cohen Hillel Academy has been invited to participate, as well as the Marblehead police and fire chiefs, and members of the Marblehead ministerial community, such as Alling. The new Torah will be dedicated to the memory of the children who died in the Holocaust.

Sitting down in front of the Torah after washing their hands, the Stairmans joined Rabbi Levi Selwyn, who has been helping people write in Torah letters for four years. The Stairmans would get the first two letters of Exodus, a nun and a shin. Rabbi Selwyn explained that the letters were the first in a passage in which Joseph asks his brothers to take his bones out of Egypt, so that he won't be buried in the land where they were slaves.

That every Jew write one's own Torah Scroll is the last of the 613 commandments in the Torah. Just as an entire Torah becomes unfit for use if a single letter is illegible, the corollary is also true; writing one letter of the Torah is equivalent to scribing an entire Torah. While one letter ruins a Torah; one letter also completes a Torah.

Both the Stairmans and Alling felt the significance of the occasion. As Robin Stairman wrote her nun, Rabbi Selwyn noted that her letter was the first in the word "neshama," or soul.

"When he said the word soul," Robin Stairman said later, "I felt all my relatives around me. They were there with me while I was making my letter."

Alling was touched, as well. "I can't explain why," he said, "but I feel very moved by this." Alling received the letter bet, the first in the word "beit," or home. A "beautiful" letter, said Rabbi Selwyn. Rabbi Meyer agreed. "There is a side open on this letter," he explained to the Episcopal minister, "just as a side of one's home should always be open to others."

The new Torah is expected to be ready for the Marblehead congregation's bima in time for the High Holy Days in the fall.